

### Populist Female Leaders should not be underestimated

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# POPULIST FEMALE LEADERS

*should not be underestimated*

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*Far-right movements are no longer solely havens for undereducated, anti-establishment chauvinists—thus the importance of female leaders should not be underestimated. Populist parties have increased their public appeal and offer seemingly attractive alternatives to Europe’s current employment crisis by promoting an anti-modernist perspective on emancipation. Progressive forces need to counter.*



**An interview with Andrea Peto**  
Associate Professor at the Department of Gender Studies  
of the Central European University in Budapest.



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**Queries: Despite of the vast array of academic literature on the populist radical right, there is still relatively little attention paid to the role of women in such movements. Is this changing with the emergence of women leaders such as Pia Kjærsgaard or Marine Le Pen?**

**Andrea Peto:** In the past twenty years there has been cutting edge critical research on gender, mobilisation and the far right, as well as on understanding the far right from a gender perspective, which raises questions about the lack of visibility of this research to a wider audience.

In Germany, Women's Network for Research on Far-Right Extremism has been working on gender and the far right for more than ten years and has tried to coordinate its efforts with researchers in other European countries. These women are diligently researching far-right politics and subcultures, sometimes even putting themselves at risk, but they are still not recognised by mainstream academia and constantly struggle to obtain funding for their work. They are also introducing new research topics such as far right and masculinity.

On the other hand, Germany has put a vast amount of money into research on far-right political movements and activism in other countries, especially since Breivik's attack and the gloomy forecasts for the upcoming

European Parliament elections, but this is mostly descriptive political science-oriented research.

**Q: Does the emergence of these female leaders make the far right more acceptable to women?**

**A.P.:** I think some far-right strains have always been acceptable to some women. Here the question is what characterises women who are mobilised as voters and what are the institutional mechanisms that promote women to leading positions. The far right is traditionally viewed as a masculine movement and if you analyse the electoral appeal of these parties, you see that there are more men supporting them than women. But this is not a reason to forget about women who support and vote for far-right parties.

In the past years, a major shift has happened in the mobilisation for far-right parties: these parties are changing their agenda and appeal to the public. Those who are participating in these parties are not the undereducated anti-establishment losers portrayed by the media in the past, but highly educated professionals who speak foreign languages, know the language of politics and have experience in the political system. The women who actually make it in those political parties have a very good education and social skills. These women have a symbolic presence,

and they are inviting more women to join the ranks and enter politics on their terms as we do not see too many female leaders emerging in progressive politics, especially in "New Europe".

**Q: Can the increasing role of women leaders in populist movements be considered as a structural change or rather as a communication strategy?**

**A.P.:** This question is actually representative of a very traditional understanding and interpretation of far-right women in politics, as pendants or relatives of powerful male politicians.

In the past few years several new female leaders have emerged not only in France and Hungary, but also in Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and Belgium, and they are actually changing the face of far-right activism. The emergence of racist feminism advocated by the far right is a serious challenge for progressive politics.

These women are agents of change, so no matter how deeply you disagree with what they are saying, they should not be framed as puppets. They are the advocates of an anti-modernist emancipation. If you frame them as puppets, it is not only disrespectful to them as human beings, but it is also a major political mistake, because you are underestimating the political appeal and political support they have, and you cannot beat them with political arguments. It is a major political and strategic issue.

**Q: When it comes to voting, women with populist views do not often vote for populist parties, while men are more likely to do so. Why is that so?**

**A.P.:** This relates to the taboo surrounding public support for far-right ideas. And it is a very gendered assumption that men are more willing to broach taboo topics in pub-

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## “WHAT WE ARE SEEING NOW WITH THE FAR RIGHT IS A VERY APPEALING ‘SOLUTION’ TO THE STRUCTURAL CRISIS OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY.”

### Key Points

→ The relationship between far right politics and gender has been researched for more than a decade but has not yet reached a wide audiences.

→ Our current democratic processes structurally exclude women, and the far right has reworked its agenda and appeal to the public to offer a sense of agency in a different, anti-modernist framework.

→ Far-right parties have made use of gender politics to bring their narrative on other issues into mainstream conservative discourse. Progressive political thought needs to reconceptualise democracy in a way that empowers women instead of marginalising them.

lic as women are expected to be shy. Generally those who support the far right were Until recently very, those who support the far right were generally cautious about sharing their views, but I've noticed a major shift in rhetoric. In the past five to ten years, xenophobia and welfare chauvinism have become more and more acceptable and mainstream, with increasing public exposure, as the internet and social media opened a new chapter in transmitting those ideas that further transcends the distinction public and private.

If men are more likely to be in a position to express their ideas publicly, which is an assumption, then you can say that the question is legitimate. But I would not say that women are reluctant, because that would indicate that women do not have the agency to say what they would like to say. And that is not the case. In Poland the “army of mohair Berets”, as the press call them—the elderly, religious women who listen to Radio Maryja—have a crucial role in transforming what public discourse on human rights issues is tolerated by the public.

**Q: In recent years there has been a notable increase in the use of the feminist discourse by populist radical-right politicians as a weapon to be used against certain minorities (Muslims, Roma, Travellers). Is this genuine, or just an instrument used**

**for electoral gain? What effect will it have on the overall gender discourse?**

**A.P.:** The discourse about minorities is a very complex issue, because they are usually portrayed as “non-Christian, coloured migrants”. All those differences are related to the concept of European whiteness, and this is a constitutive part of the far-right ideology, which is deeply rooted in the European colonial legacy.

This is not only instrumental; but it is a constitutive part of far-right thinking to create difference and to profess the supremacy of one group over another.

**Q: Are there regional differences in the interaction between populism, the far right and gender? For example, is there more machismo in the far right of some countries than in others?**

**A.P.:** The far right parties are deeply rooted in their national context. But we must not let this mislead us, because they are a part of a European and global phenomenon. Their differences are related to their respective national political cultures. The Norwegian far-right Progress Party, which currently sits in the government, is very different from the Romanian far-right party. The political culture is different in Norway than in Romania, but as far as the overarching of family-centric conception of, their far-right parties are very close to each other. Family is a key notion for these



Anke Van dermeersch (Belgium), Marine Le Pen (France), Pia Kjærsgaard (Denmark), Krisztina Morvai (Hungary).  
Poster of the movie "Le Populisme au Féminin"

movements, as according to them it is the core element that makes up the nation. This family-centred imagination about the future envisions a world with only a heteronormative nuclear families in which the mother stays home and takes care of the children, only working part time, which appears to offer a solution Europe's rising unemployment.

It is dangerous, because there is a real problem, unemployment and the transformation of the concept of work, and here they offer a kind of solution. And very often you see in history that when real problems emerge, very harmful solutions are offered to offset them.

**Q: How do you differentiate between conservative and far-right discourse? Both seem to share a colonial legacy.**

**A.P.:** Quite often in the media the line between the two is very blurred. In the case of women's issues and gender politics, there is a very thin line between the essentialist feminist movement and the far-right women's movement, which is based on the discourse of difference. There is a

possibility of mainstreaming that kind of discourse into conservative political thought through gender politics.

There is the example of the Hungarian conservative women's umbrella organisation, presented an award called the "Golden Wheat Stalk" to a female journalist named Beatrix Siklósi, who had previously interviewed David Irving on public television and openly shares her anti-Roma and anti-Semitic sentiments. Here you see this very poisonous mixture coming together under the heading: women protecting the nation as they protect of family.

**Q: Could the difficulties faced by certain women in accessing the political system push them to the fringes, and make the far right more attractive to them?**

**A.P.:** Women who support the far right are actually not on the fringes. If you look at the composition of far right supporters and voters, for example in the case of Hungary, their electoral support is from the middle class, rural areas, and those with a university degree. We cannot characterise them as losers of the transition as some

of them are pretty successful business-women who made their career in the ethnocentric market they are advocating as a response to globalisation. What we are seeing now with the far right is a very appealing "solution" to the structural crisis of representative democracy.

**Q: But it's not gender-specific, is it?**

**A.P.:** It is gender-specific, because this kind of liberal democracy, which in Europe is connected with the free market, is a deeply gendered system. This vision of democracy structurally excludes women, and the far right is offering agency for these women in a different, anti-modernist framework. Again, this is a challenge for progressive politics: how to reform, how to reconceptualise democracy in a way that does not marginalise women. It could really offer an opportunity for women to be represented and their interests to be articulated in an intersectional perspective.